After home schooling my children for many years while living in a developing country, I wanted to stay in a field where I could continue to work directly with children. Becoming a certified teacher or nurse were two areas to which I was most drawn. Special education was the best fit in between teaching in a regular classroom and nursing, a choice I will later explain. My gifts and skills are suited toward small groups or the one-to-one paradigm found in a classroom, while special education often requires attention to details related to health, similar to a nurse.

The reason for choosing special education goes back to the days when my children were small and we lived among indigenous peoples in another country. I made friends with the local women, and my children and I visited them frequently. They taught me about local medicine, language and customs of their culture. I had the chance to teach them some English. Possibly due to limited education, there were times when their children were treated in a rough manner. I made it a point to “model” gentle speaking and physical nurturing, and was very touched to see the mothers I visited copy what I did, sometimes exactly. I saw the effects continue from one visit to the next.

Because this culture has a caste system, I had friends who only by virtue of their position in the caste were denied the opportunity for higher education or vocational training after high school. While they may have had the best grades and the best qualities of character, this made no difference. For another group of people it didn’t matter what caste they were born into: those with disabilities-especially cognitive limitations were treated poorly, sometimes in indescribably savage ways. All of these experiences have contributed to my becoming passionate about developing my skills in special education. I hope to eventually work in a collaborative setting internationally to uplift conditions for all children with special needs, particularly those living in areas where they are considered uneducable or unworthy of being treated with dignity. I am convinced that communication systems developed for children who are non-verbal or who have speech delays are the key to bringing out the potential of these children and their cultures.

The ideal teaching environment in relationship to collaboration for a life skills program would include a special education teacher for each level: elementary, middle school and high school. This group of teachers would meet on a frequent basis in consultation with the special education director about the needs of each student. There is a two-fold benefit of the teachers meeting altogether 1) the collaborative experience of each teacher contributes to the betterment of the students and 2) the teachers of the older grades become familiar with the students when they are young enabling them to be more aware of their individual circumstances, histories and needs when they reach higher levels. In order to receive a proper education, students would be supported by the collaborative efforts of speech therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, music-therapy, art therapy and education technicians to carry-out the goals for each student. Equally important would be access to a network administrator to fix computers when needed (this need is often urgent with this population). Also needed is a staff member hired specifically to continually make materials such as those needed for the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) from software such as Board Maker™, customized for each student. At least 45 minutes would be provided for consultation between each education technician and their supervising teacher on a weekly basis, with a group consultation among all of the staff for each of the 3 levels, at least one hour weekly. I would most like to be the lead teacher of a K-3 special education classroom because I find this age group most challenging, although I am comfortable working with children of any level or age.

Opportunities for leadership mainly occur for me as a liaison for the students for whom I am responsible. Not all professionals consider it their job to seek connection with other colleagues; therefore I take the initiative to learn all I can about best practices from the point of view of each specialist so that I can implement them with the student and share with other staff. In addition, I seek parental input as well because they know their child best. I keep each specialist and the parents informed about the current situation and progress of the student so they can build on each other’s input.

The vision statement at my school says:

“The parents, teachers and students at Cascade Brook School believe that we are COLLECTIVELY responsible for creating a learning environment which is safe, supportive and intellectually challenging.  Our vision for ourselves as learners requires that we act with intelligence and moral integrity, compassion and personal responsiveness.”

This statement applies to the professionals working with students in the life skills program since the students themselves are not generally able to lead the way with these goals. However, it is reassuring that the typical students, some more than others, help create a supportive environment for the students in the life skills program. At times this has made all the difference.

The results from my learning style inventory are accurate except I would have expected a higher score on visual. The high scores with aural and physical reflect my history with music and movement/dance.

My expectations of this class are: to become nwell versed and capable in the development and planning of curriculum and assessment, and to become completely comfortable working with the technology involved.